

# Black no more and the souls of black folk: what do they have in common?

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



As African Americans who lived around the turn of the 20th century, both George S. Schuyler and W. E. B. Du Bois encountered the issue of race in the United States in intimate fashion. The identity of the African American was an unresolved question during this period, and as prolific writers and social commentators, these two men constructed solutions to this matter through their respective literary approach. Schuyler composed a provocative narrative entitled *Black No More*, which offered an answer to the issue of race through satire. Du Bois alternatively held a more practical approach to dissolving racial barriers in the United States, which took into account the identity of the modern African American within a series of essays entitled *The Souls of Black Folk*. To the same extent that their literary styles differed, so too did their perspectives on race. Through fictional example, Schuyler regarded race as a quality among human beings which served to mislead, allowing it to be wielded as a tool for separation and disparity among the groups which it defined, while Du Bois' insight into the Afro-American condition, both past and present, uplifted race as being a stronghold of community and therefore a source of individual empowerment.

In *Black No More*, Schuyler presented the quality of race as an obstacle that stood between African Americans and realizing their true identity. Schuyler understood, as did all African Americans in the 1930s, that the problem with race is the social pressure that being of a certain race can impose. Being of an inferior race, it can barricade an individual and a group's collective aspirations. Race can be reminiscent of a smokescreen that hangs before one's actual identity. If this is the case, race becomes something that we want to escape and to transcend. Given this confinement, *Black No More*

presents the idea that if we were able to change our race, we should. As compared to finding a way for the black community to assimilate with the white community through social reform, Schuyler proposed an end to the color line by assimilating African Americans visually. Through Dr. Junius Crookman's technological creation, known as Black No More, Inc., the skin of blacks can miraculously be turned white. In the book, the process is tremendously effective because the black people who undergo the Black No More process are not only white in color, but become virtually indistinguishable from whites in physical appearance as well. This provided an avenue for many people to live a life of increased privilege without the anxiety of racial discrimination. In spite of all of the promise that this business scheme presented, by erasing the black population in the United States, Crookman effectively erodes the significance of race along with it. The dynamic of race changes from an inherent, in-born quality that all human beings possess to something that is constructed and we therefore have a choice in deciding. As the birth of black babies from seemingly white couples within the novel indicates, race is still defined to be a genetic characteristic. In such a world where the color of one's skin is mutable, however, race has meaning only as something socially constructed. In alignment with the selfish views that many of Schuyler's characters possess, we would all choose to be white because it is the race that is in the majority and provides the greatest personal advantage. In this context, race is a fiction.

Given this notion that race resembles a smokescreen that clouds our true identity, *Black No More* shows how race can be very misleading. African Americans living during the early 20th century felt their culture to be inferior to that of whites and the attitudes of black characters within the book are a reflection of that sentiment. Instead of promoting an inferior culture, the normative choice for them was to look for ways to become white. This ability to fully enter into white culture is what made *Black No More* such a lucrative business. Schuyler, however, was convinced that black culture was equal to that of white culture, and articulated this lack of difference through the intelligence that many of his black, or previously black characters possess in contrast to the white characters. Dr. Crookman, for example, is clearly very intelligent to have created such a powerful force behind the *Black No More* operation. Additionally, Max, the guinea pig of the operation, lives in a world that has convinced him that he is inferior by his skin color alone, yet he becomes a white man, who goes out to exploit droves of white men for his own personal gain. The setbacks which Max faced as a black man were not innate, but were imposed by society. Max is a smart individual, and the only factor that played into his social disparity before and after his transformation was the color of his skin.

Yet, undergoing such a seemingly simple transition from black to white indicates the lack of a black culture. This lack of a black culture was seen through Max's lack of self-evaluation when undergoing the *Black No More* process. There is no regret that Max encounters by turning his back on his kind, and neither do the individuals that follow him in the process. The only

thing Max realizes is the lie that white culture perpetuates. For as much freedom and as many liberties as being white provides, the superiority of white culture in comparison to black culture within the United States has misled him into thinking that white people are more interesting than they truly are, while that is simply not the case. Even though Max finds the black culture more interesting, he still does not think twice about turning his back on his kind in exchange for greater prosperity and happiness.

Considering that race can be manipulated to change one's appearance and consequently, their liberties, race exists as a tool. One would imagine that the abolition of blackness in Black No More would result in an end to racism, the solution to the race problem in the United States yet, in a paradoxical twist, a color line must be fabricated. It becomes known that the extremely pale people are the black people who turned white. Pale individuals become the target of discrimination, which influences all people to collectively desire a darker skin color. Instead of being a bastion of values that has the ability to unite groups of people, race is acknowledged as something divisive. This is signified by the droves of African Americans who turn their back on their kind with little thought and pay for the Black No More process day after day. In a capitalist society, race ultimately matters more than class. As compared to a world where race is indicative of something beneath the surface, Black No More creates a reality in which race is controllable, and at the fee of \$50, it is a tool accessible for all black people, even in a post-Depression society. To use race as a means of providing an underclass is a problem that is deeply rooted in our economic system, and cannot be purged without great social

change. Schuyler conveyed the absurdity of this system through the public lynching of the book's political figures. This event shows that even in a time when there is great social change, humans still possess a fundamental desire to discriminate against others based on the color of their skin. As a former socialist, Schuyler may have been making a point about the flaw of the capitalist system, but the oppression of others is an ethical matter that undoubtedly falls upon the shoulders of the American people.

Instead of intending to fabricate a panacea to the tune of Black No More, Inc., Du Bois' intent within *The Souls of Black Folk* was to flesh out the impediment that being black provided for the African American individual. Du Bois' main concern in his essays rested in what he called the "veil." This veil is a symbol for the ignorance of America towards the problems of blacks. It blocks insight into the problems of African Americans and serves to prevent blacks from taking their place in society as full American citizens. Until the veil is removed, argued Du Bois, the continuing schism between the two races will grow wider and wider.

Closely tied to the concept of the veil is that of "double consciousness," or the process by which blacks have two identities within one body. Du Bois historically charts the development of the 'World Spirit' through its many peoples: Chinese, Egyptians, Indians, Greeks, Romans and Germans. Of this 7th type, the African American, Du Bois conceives "...sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world..."<sup>1</sup> It is this seventh son, who

possesses a distinct “twoness.” For Du Bois, the African American possessed no direct vision, but was measured only by the tape of the white world that oppressed him. This seventh son lives as both an American and an African American. The trouble with this was not the possession of two identities, but the possession of two contradictory identities. To survive in America, the black man must assimilate, yet he is bound to a unifying sense of community that his color provides. This duality of being serves as a kind of self-alienation for the black individual.

Although the African American alone shares this crisis of identity, Du Bois expressed that this uniqueness of being bore a united community that was empowered by their shared experience. Du Bois noted that the black community was signified by a number of defining cultural developments. In particular, he gave credit to the African American church as an institution that served to bind the souls of black folk. He described the church as “a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and Right.”<sup>2</sup> While some churches had simply become places of business that aimed to avoid “unpleasant questions both within and without the black world,”<sup>3</sup> they still remained a place where social, political, and economic inequity could be addressed in a public forum. The development of African American spirituals, or “sorrow songs,” also spoke to a development in which hope and community had been forged from despair. Sorrow songs had a great depth of meaning to them, and were written at the intersection of history, poetry, celebration, sadness, and soul. They had been refined through years of repetition and were songs that brought together a

group through the collective spirit that is embodied within the song. The ability for spirituals to reinforce the value of preserving a distinctly black culture may have been the reason for why Du Bois called this music “ the greatest gift of the Negro people.”<sup>4</sup> Both the church and sorrow songs provided an avenue for African Americans to turn angst and frustration regarding their racial barriers into strength through numbers. Only other African Americans could truly empathize with their struggle and this public recognition of their shared plight served to channel negative emotions into an atmosphere of hope. According to Du Bois, the mutual understanding of the black community did not only serve uplift the African American; it defined him.

The solution to many of the problems that afflicted African Americans emerged for Du Bois in the form of education. Du Bois was an impassioned advocate for higher education. While Booker T. Washington focused on educating blacks for the trades and manual labor, Du Bois insisted that blacks should have access to intellectual education rivaling that available to whites. It was through enlightened public schooling that education would not only reach blacks, but whites as well. Only through this mutual knowledge could this veil and consequently the affliction of the black individual be lifted. Although Du Bois received a classical education, as the numerous Greek and Roman allusions within his essays display, he did not believe every black should receive a classical education. He recognized that many are not up to the task, but a “ talented tenth” could receive this type of education. These blacks would then go out and spread education and culture within the black



community. Du Bois himself is an exemplum of his own ideas, by showing how a black can benefit from education and provide a common ground between black and white.

During a speech which addressed the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy advised that we “tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.” This quotation serves to characterize the relationship that these two works share. Schuyler’s *Black No More* provides as a normative view for how people and the idea of race functions in a society, while Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* offers a prescriptive view for how all groups in the United States should behave with respect to the presence of race. By virtue of a sweeping and seemingly brilliant solution to the African American identity, *Black No More* serves to show that there is no immediate solution to problems of race. The most common trait among the characters within Schuyler’s novel, regardless of their race, is the materialist sentiment that they possess. The reality is that individual interests and aspirations of dominance over others will always motivate people. Even in a society with one race, there will always be an effort for individuals to stratify themselves through class. In light of these constants within society, we must uphold the ideals that Du Bois espoused. Whether race is a social construction or it is indicative of something more essential about who we are, its effects on society are very real. Du Bois provides us with a manner of dealing with the ubiquity of the color line, whether black or white. While African Americans may struggle to live with this twoness of identity, race can be an important quality to embrace because it provides the support of a specific community.

Guided by the collective good of both races, Du Bois' proposition for the availability of higher education would ease the social afflictions of black folk by allowing them to achieve greater prosperity and to provide white individuals the ability to better understand and appreciate their position within society.